

FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

(2 Timothy 4.1-8)

I doubt that most of us here this morning will not have sung or heard the hymn *Fight the Good Fight?* (a hymn written 150 years ago by an Ulsterman called John Samuel Bewley Monsell -who used the KJV of this letter to Timothy as the lyrics).

I wonder what does the hymn conjure up in the old memory banks when you hear it - Sunday school, school assemblies? I once worked with a lady who told me she had it sung at her wedding!

For me personally it brings to mind the scene in the wonderful 1981 British film *Chariots of Fire* centred around the 1924 Paris Olympics and the rivalry between the runners Harold Abrahams of England and Eric Liddell of Scotland who was a devout Christian and is remembered by many for refusing to run in the 100m as the final would be held on a Sunday and so switched to the 400m. Both men actually went on to win gold in their separate events.

There is a scene in the film before the Olympics where Liddell is running at an athletics meeting in Scotland and he is running in the pouring rain for Scotland against England (in which he wins the 100 yds). The hymn *Fight the Good Fight* is used as the soundtrack. At the end of the meeting when the sun eventually comes out he speaks at an open-air service and gives what we today might term an altar call to ask people get up and commit their lives to God.

As a new Christian at that time and, if I say it myself, a half decent distance runner the hymn and the film scene inspired me then and still does now, thankfully replacing my previous childhood memories of tired Sunday schools and boring evening services looking at the dark outside the windows. I believe it was termed muscular Christianity in the 20s/30s but I could certainly identify with it.

So we now know from our reading from 2 Timothy that Paul has coined the expression - *fight the good fight* so lets now look at this passage and see what was written two thousand years ago might be saying to us today.

It's believed this letter was written between 50-100 AD and form what are some times called the Pastoral Letters as they are written to the individuals Timothy and Titus (and another Philemon) by their head pastor Paul rather than being written to churches such as those letters to the churches of Corinth or Ephesus.

Paul is writing from prison awaiting his execution at the hands of Nero to Timothy who we know is a young man mentioned in the book of Acts. As senior pastor Paul is offering support, encouragement and advice on the day to day life of running a local church and the role of the pastor within that. Our reading today is in the second of two letters from Paul to Timothy.

The letter begins, *In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom* reminding Timothy (and us) that we live awaiting the return of Jesus as Judge of the living and the dead, in what would be termed then and what we should really regard now as *the last days or final days*. Obviously 2,000 years apart which to us seems mysterious but we have to trust in God's timing not ours!

To give some background and perspective -Western Christianity sometimes seems to understate that Paul and the majority of first century Christians were Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah promised through the Old Testament, he had by his death for many and by his bodily resurrection fulfilled the scriptures.

The Jews believed in two *ages* or *times*, the first being the *Present Age* and the second was the *life of the Age to Come*. Over millennia the term *life of the Age to Come* has disappeared and has been replaced by the terms *eternal life* or the *kingdom of heaven*. In essence, to first century Jews *eternal life* meant *life of the Age to Come*, there is little discussion in

any of the gospels regarding the actual process of going to heaven. When Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven most commentators understand it to mean he is talking about the rule of Heaven or God's reign coming to earth, as we implore in the Lord's Prayer when we say *Your kingdom come.*

As far as Paul (and the 4 Gospel writers) are concerned this ushering in of God's heavenly rule on earth had already begun at the first Easter but he and all Christians in the first century were awaiting the imminent return of Jesus to complete this work and establish the *life of the Age to Come* promised in the scriptures.

In the light of this imminently expected coming judgement and re-appearance of Jesus he is saying to Timothy; *Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.*

This is as valid for us today as it was to Timothy, get on with it, the clock is ticking and none of us knows when the final whistle will blow either in our own lives or on the world. There will be times when we feel discouraged or ill prepared or not worthy and the devil will do all he can to maintain these feelings. At these times as always but more than ever we need to rely on God not ourselves and pray and seek prayer from our brothers and sisters so we can live out and speak the gospel. Also, it certainly challenges me as - do I have any urgency for the kingdom of God? and if not why not?

Paul continues by saying, *For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers who tell what they wish to hear; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.*

Timothy is commanded to stand up to those in his church who challenge sound doctrine and the spirit inspired word of God. *Itching ears* is an interesting term, looking at this it seems to imply a desire to hear a different accent- or different style of preacher rather than the gospel

itself which leads into *they will heap up for themselves* teachers who tell what they wish to hear, as in those that tell them what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear.

Sadly, we probably all know of situations like this, Alan Fairish faced the reverse of this at Stockton Parish Church as few there wanted to hear what he had to say, but praise God he prevailed and went on to help re-establish God's kingdom in the town Centre there.

Paul says -and they will turn *their* ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

This is really dangerous when fables and traditions become part of doctrine within the church, the early examples are included in these letters demanding all new male Christian converts be circumcised or need to refrain from eating certain foods.

This continues through church history in the medieval church with the worship and pilgrimages to and worship of relics or old saints' bones. Roman Catholics eating fish on Fridays. In the modern age we only have to think of the prosperity gospel expounded in the United States by the TV evangelists at the end of the last century, even rules about not wearing or wearing hats in church!

Next Paul says to Timothy *but you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.*

Note the – *But You* a specific instruction to Timothy as an individual – *but you, not the rest of the church* – similar in his tone to "but as for you man of God flee from all this" from 1 Timothy 6.11 which implores young Timothy to flee from false teachers and fight the good fight of faith which Paul again repeats in our reading in verse 7 of 2 Timothy 4.

Paul offers his own selfless example to his young charge that while his own life this side of the age to come may be nearly over, he has kept the faith, ran and finished the race and has fought the good fight throughout despite betrayal, failed friends, shipwreck, death threats to

name but a few of the obstacles he has had to overcome - as an inspiration to Timothy and all future church leaders to help him and them as verse 5 says *endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill their ministry*. Where an evangelist is simply a person who proclaims the good news of what Jesus has done.

Paul finishes this section of our reading talking about awaiting the reward of the crown of righteousness. The Greek term for crown here is *stefanos* which means the victor's laurel as opposed to the Greek word for a royal crown.

So we are back where we started in the athletics arena again. Paul has run the race, played by the rules and won the faith victory. As Christians we tend to have issues with rewards as we believe we are justified by faith through the death of Jesus so how can we expect a reward? I would suggest here that Paul is alluding again to the return of Jesus and hearing the words, "*Well done good and faithful servant*". Surely a reward and greeting we all must long to hear at some point in our future?

In Matthew 6 Jesus talks about doing your good deeds in private and being rewarded by God as opposed to those who do their good deeds in public and have already receive their reward.

However, the subject of rewards is another sermon by someone who understands the subject much better than I do!

So to conclude...

I pray that we too will be inspired by Paul's example as we too will surely face afflictions if we seek to fulfill our ministry and do the work of an evangelist.

May we fight the good fight both on our own and together alongside our brothers and sisters in the strength and service of our Lord and Master Jesus, as we like Paul did, awaiting his coming and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. Amen